

IT'S THE MESSAGE!

I Corinthians 1:10-18

Intro

One of the ways that we (incorrectly) view the early church is that it was a harmonious place where there were no disagreements and certainly no discord. One of the reasons that we carry that image is because of some of the early descriptions of the church in Acts where we are told, 'everything was held in common'. Church leaders like this image because we are able to say when we preach, 'we should be more like them!'

But that image is not real. The early church was a place where disagreements, discord, and doubt were always, at the very least, hanging around the peripheries, if not right in the middle of everything.

For example, the Men's Group that meets on Thursday morning happens to be reading I Corinthians right now. We got to a chapter that you never hear preached from the pulpit: chapter 11. What we read there was the fact that the early church in Corinth was so divisive, that they could even take communion together. Communion! These are the same people that, as we heard last week, Paul declared were lacking no spiritual gift.

Does that sound unified to you? Me neither.

You know what it does sound like though? Real life.

Here's a little bit of the back story: Paul has either been visited by or received correspondence from several members of the household of a woman named Chloe. We are not told if they are family members or servants, but the information that they have passed along about the community of faith in Corinth has sent Paul into a world of disheartenment that, as he finally begins to write, manifests itself as frustration. This frustration, much like the frustration and aggravation that parents have in relation to their children, becomes the driving force behind what we are about to hear.

To maintain this particular line of relational thought, think of the Corinthians as Paul's children. Now think about your own family: have you ever seen siblings argue or fight? That's happening...in a lot of ways. As simplistic as this may sound, it does catch more than a mere reflection of reality when Paul grumbles, "each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ."

This familial division, whether simple or complicated, recent or long-standing, is something that we still face today. It is with that in mind that we hear this message to see how we might apply it to our lives. The scripture reads this way.

I Corinthians 1:10-18

¹⁰ Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. ¹² What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." ¹³ Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified

for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

¹⁸ For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

“It’s the Message!”

Let me see if any of you have ever borne witness to some version of the following “discussion”.

Alone in a living room sits an older brother, minding his own business, playing a video game. After several minutes of serene solitude, there is a rumbling in an adjoining room. This sound can signify only one thing: the entrance of the younger brother. The older brother tries to mentally prepare himself for whatever may come around the corner, all the while hoping beyond hope that his younger sibling will head in another direction.

Then, in an instant, the thundering stops, and in the second of quiet that follows the older brother wonders if perhaps this is his lucky day. A few moments later, as the younger brother emerges from around the corner, the answer is clearly no.

He decides to take the offensive hoping to disarm him peacefully. “Hi there. I’m playing a game. You can play your game on the steps.’

The younger brother responds, “No. I want to play with you.”

“Well, (and there is a slight pause as he realizes that he isn’t doing anything overly important but still not wanting to play with her brother right now), like I said, I’m busy right now. We can play later.”

The younger brother lumbers over physically and sensing verbally weakness asks, “How about the sports game?” “No.” “Racing game?” “NO.” “Can I watch you play?”

Of course, at this point the younger brother is already right next to his older brother and is all but leaning on him.

He can’t take it anymore, and snaps, ... a little, which might not seem like anything, but remember, he’s a teenage boy. “Would you please just play your game on the step? I’m sitting in her having a nice time doing. Please, 10 more minutes. Leave me alone.’

The younger brother, wounded, but not completely crushed says, ‘Please? I will sit quietly.”

“Not now! 10 minutes!”

What happens next is inevitable, one of the two disgruntled parties storms out of the room calling out for the nearest parent to rectify the grievous wrong that has been committed, or the nearest parental unit hollers into the room because they simply can’t handle the dust up anymore.

So, have any of you been involved in a “discussion” that is similar to that one? Thankfully, I have no firsthand experience of such “conversations” taking place in my family’s home.. at least not lately.

However, as all of us know, these sorts of confrontations, where people get upset with one another for whatever reason and then go off to find someone help rectify their disagreement, happen all the time.

Sometimes it is between siblings.

Sometimes it’s between parent and child.

Sometimes it’s between friends or couples.

A lot of times it is between complete strangers (politics, anyone?).

But it happens all the time.

As we have heard in these words from I Corinthians, Paul has been called in as the parental figure to help these disagreeing parties move beyond what has caused the level of tension to increase from low grade annoyance to full on upset.

The disagreement, as we pick it up here, is over how the community of faith, the brothers and sisters in Christ, have begun to divide themselves up. This division seems to be based upon either the person who led them to be a member in the church, or a personal understanding of one of the theologies of these leaders. As we mentioned earlier, this state of affairs disappoints and frustrates Paul to no end and once he gets through his introductory portion of the letter (which we talked about last week and, all things considered, is rather standard among all the letters written by Paul) he goes right after the people at the church at Corinth: “Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.”

Subtext?

“For the love of God (literally), stop what you are doing!”

Paul’s rationale for stopping this sort of talk comes in a series of very simple rhetorical questions: “has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” Clearly the answer to all of these questions is an unadulterated no. But, as we all recognize, there are way too many times when the simplest of disagreements can lead to the largest of fissures.

Paul, like a parent, is placing a mirror up before his children in the church at Corinth and making them take a good hard look at what they are disagreeing about. Different segments of people are making claims toward others that they (the others) are somehow deficient in their relationship with God because of which human (Paul, Peter, or Apollos) they resonate with the most. (Even the people who try and stay out of the fray by stating that they, “belong to Christ” are saying that the tactics of division are acceptable.) This reality of making distinctions based on a particular apostle is, at least in part, connected to how eloquently the gospel was proclaimed by each of these gentlemen.

The reason that we believe that this is the case is because of how Paul takes a self-deprecating shot at how he was able to convey the message of Christ.

His comment of, “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power” screams out, “it isn’t about me, or Peter, or Apollos! It’s about the message that we have been called to bring. That is where the importance lies.”

Paul’s frustration at his children is because he knows that the base message that has been delivered by each of these men is the same. It comes in different forms and with different slants, but the message is the same. Even though there are differences in the words that were used, there is a unity that is found in Christ that must be acknowledged.

Why? Because it supersedes the differences that are put forward through the sinful vessels known as humanity.

This is Paul’s appeal: that the Corinthians recognize that despite their differences in human preference, the message that is proclaimed actually brings them together.

But they have to sort through the style, or their personal preference, or bias, in order to actually build upon the message that was being proclaimed in the first place.

We live in a world that is obsessed with style. Substance? Substance is fine, but if it doesn’t look good, or sound comforting to our ears we tend to ignore it or at the very least disregard it in too quick a fashion.

What Paul is reminding us is that truth, the truth and love of God, are able to be carried forward into the world, our world, in a multitude of ways and through a multitude of people with a variety of styles. Don’t focus on the style on the outer dressing: focus on the message. If God is there, celebrate and stand with that message regardless of whether you personally resonate with the style that it’s coming to you or not.

If God’s presence, God’s truth, God’s love are not in what is being proclaimed, then do not stand with that message, even if the messenger comes in a package that you think is awesome.

This is true, whether it be from the pulpit, the classroom, our jobs, or with our politicians.

Obviously, there are certain individuals who we are able to resonate with, more than others.

However, and of this I have no doubt, the truth of God, that through the blood of Jesus Christ we have found redemption and that through his resurrection we have found salvation, ties all of those messengers together in a way that we could have never done on our own. This unity of message, albeit declared in different ways through a multitude of different avenues (and yes, I mean you too!), proclaims to all who will hear that we are connected with one another because we are all children of the same Creator. We are unified, not because of the person through whom you hear the voice and message of God, but because of the message that is delivered through those respective voices.

Paul made an appeal that is still very true today: do not come together because of the vessel through which the message is conveyed, but instead because of the life-breathed message itself.

We can very easily get hung up on a particular personality and end up acting like the brothers that I talked about earlier.

My appeal to you (much like Paul's appeal to the Corinthians) is this: I pray that the main reason that you believe and follow God is not because of any messenger, but because of the message. Allow the rock that you stand upon to be the message of Jesus Christ.

After Sermon Prayer

God, You are able to speak to so many people, in so many ways, through so many individuals, proclaiming one message of salvation. We celebrate this unity, even it's diversity. Help us to hear Your truth in all of the avenues that You decide to proclaim it, so that we might be able to truly understand that what brings us together as the church universal, is the message that we have heard through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.